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ABSTRACT

The author looks at the legal responsibilities of small school districts in Washington state regarding the provision of programs for gifted students. Sections address a case study of a 14 year old child who was denied permission to remain in the gifted program located in her former residential district, legislation mandating the provision of educational opportunities for all gifted children in Washington, the issue of whether small school districts are being excluded from state gifted funds, the question of whether small school districts are "too small" to educate gifted children, and the future of gifted education in small districts. (SB)

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GIFTED EDUCATION
THE FUTURE FOR SMALL DISTRICTS IN WASHINGTON STATE

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LaConner School District

I. A CASE STUDY: ILLUSTRATING THE DILEMMA

Kirsten is a fourteen year old who was identified as a gifted child at her middle school and places in a gifted education unit for all her academic coursework.

Last year, her parents built a home in the country, thereby establishing residence in the LaConner School District. The parents petitioned the Laconner School Board to allow Kirsten to continue school in the district of former residence.

When the request was denied, the parents appealed to the Superintendent of Public Instruction as provided by WAC 392-183-020, stating that a detrimental condition of an educational nature affecting Kirsten would exist as a result of requiring her to attend school in a small, rural district of less than 1000 pupils which was "too small" to provide a credible gifted education program.

The hearing was held October 29, 1979 with Dr. Ray Broadhead assigned as hearing officer. Kirsten's parents contended that their daughter was entitled to receive an education appropriate to her exceptional needs.

The parents introduced Washington statutes and state board regulations giving validity to their claim. They quoted prominent authorities on gifted education who emphasized that the special needs of gifted children were best met when they were placed in separate classes. In their concluding remarks they submitted that the LaConner School District was not listed in the SPI directory of gifted programs and that a district of such limited enrollment could not generate sufficient students to operate gifted classes.

The case for the school district was based upon two points. First, that a fundamental principle of public education in the state is that children attend public school within the boundaries of the district in which they reside.

Second, although LaConner did not have a state funded gifted program the district did provide a differentiated program for exceptional children that was locally funded.

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The hearing officer denied Kirsten's release from her district of residence. In his conclusions, Dr. Broadhead stated, "there seems to be a basic philosophical difference between appellant's parents and the resident school district administration as to what constitutes a gifted program. This difference cannot be considered as a basis for the determination of this case. The fact remains that a program for gifted students exists in LaConner and appellant will receive special attention and programming as a gifted student by the LaConner School District."

The ruling hinged upon the evidence that the district was providing a program for gifted students albeit the program was not recognized by the gifted child Section of the SPI nor did it meet the criteria established by that agency. Anticipating a possible appeal to the courts the attorney for the school board suggested that the superintendent seek answers to the following questions:

What is the law pertaining to gifted education and how is it applied?

Are small school districts too small to provide credible gifted education?

Are small school districts being excluded from state gifted funds?

What is the future of gifted education in small school districts?

II. WHAT IS THE LAW PERTAINING TO GIFTED EDUCATION AND HOW IS IT APPLIED?

The state of Washington has the responsibility through enabling legislation to provide educational opportunities for all gifted children. R.C.W. 28A.16.020 specifically established this legal obligation and directs the Superintendent of Public Instruction to improve the education of students of superior capacity.

The gifted student is defined as one with extraordinary intellectual and/or creative abilities demonstrated by high performance.

The Washington definition is narrower than the federal definition which in addition recognizes the following categories of giftedness: leadership, performing or visual arts and specific academic. Districts seeking developmental monies in those categories must apply to the gifted child section of the U.S. Office of Education.

For funding purposes in Washington no more than three percent of the student population may be identified as gifted. Statewide enrollment in 1979 was 731,000 which sets a statistical gifted child ceiling of 22,000. Approximately 4000 of these statistical gifted children reside in the 216 small school districts (enrollment less than 2000) and the balance reside in the remaining 84 districts.

At the beginning of the 1979-81 biennium the legislature appropriated $2,500,000 for gifted education. $230,000 was earmarked for the Centrum program at Fort Worden. The balance was to be allocated to school districts at approximately $1,135,000 for each year of the biennium. The process of allocating these funds was turned over to SPI through criteria to be established by the Gifted Child Section under the Division of Special and Equal Education Programs.

The Gifted Child Section announced that funds for gifted programs were available to all school districts submitting an application to serve the 3% academically talented population in their district. The level of funding was set at $225 per identified student with an extra $25 per student on a one time basis for identification costs.

At $225 per student the Gifted Child Section had funds for only about 1/5 of the gifted child population. Small district personnel quickly sensed that they were being

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discouraged from submitting applications. Those who persisted found that the grant writing process was time consuming and obfuscating, followed by a ruthless elimination.

III. ARE SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS BEING EXCLUDED FROM STATE GIFTED FUNDS?

Nothing in the legislation nor the guidelines prohibits small districts from applying for state gifted funds, yet in the first year of the biennium only 3 of Washington's 216 small districts were direct grant recipients. In the second half of the biennium the number was increased to 7, while 64 out of 84 districts with an enrollment of 2000 and more were grant recipients.

Rightly or wrongly, many small district administrators have expressed the belief that they were being excluded by the Gifted Child Section:

> "At a conference I attended in February I was told that a small school had little chance of being funded and I should seek other funding sources."
> "I sent a principal to a grant writing workshop. When he returned he stated that all those representing schools smaller than 2000 were told they could not hope to receive state funds."
> "We had a locally funded program for five years. It was with high expectations that we sent our proposal to the SPI. We expected to be funded. Our application was rejected."

The superintendent of one of the three small districts awarded a grant in the first year of the biennium explained:

> "You've got to write it just the way they want you to write it. I had some pressure on me from board members to get something going so I hired a grant writer and did it their way. But, you know, their way doesn't work. They won't let you do what you ought to do and what you need to do."

Jerry Hunter, Superintendent of the Orcas Island School District is happy with his grant award. With an enrollment of 400 the district received an award of $3000 and is matching it with $9000 of local funds. Seventy-one children were tested in grades K-12 in order to identify the district quota of 12 gifted children. "The money," says Hunter, "represents only a fraction of our cost but we wanted the prestige and credibility of having a state approved program."

H. W. Callan, Superintendent of Goldendale (enrollment 1300) applied for a grant but turned the money back after it was awarded to the district. "When I read all the requirements and regulations that we had to abide by, I knew it wasn't what we wanted. We're operating the program with local funds and running it the way we like it."

Mary Henri Fisher, Director of the Gifted Child Section strongly refutes the allegations that her department discriminated against small districts. Her official position is that "consistently small districts have not had the resources for planning or the personnel available for the development of a grant application."

IV. ARE SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS "TOO SMALL" TO EDUCATE GIFTED CHILDREN?

Smallness and bigness are conditions of existence and neither is inherently inferior or superior. Michael Rutter's FIFTEEN THOUSAND HOURS is the most significant effort in recent times to isolate the factors which contribute to a qualitative educational difference among schools. He found no significance between smallness and

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bigness when measuring student attitude and achievement. He did find that the presence of high ability children in regular classrooms raises the performance and behavior of all children and does not drag down the top children.

In BIG SCHOOL, SMALL SCHOOL Barker and Gump found that the quality of involvement and the satisfaction with that involvement clearly favors the smaller community school.

Margo Long, gifted education consultant at Whitworth College who works with many small districts has learned "the small school district environment can be intrinsically favorable to the education of the gifted child with or without a formal program. The natural opportunities for a gifted student to participate, assume a leadership role, become recognized for his abilities, receive special help from interested teachers exists naturally in the small district and must be contrived in the large district."

Margo believes that "small districts are handicapped because most research and program models in gifted education originate in large population centers. When the model can't be applied in Kettle Falls, the expert falls back on "the model can't be wrong so it must be the district." Now a number of small districts are pioneering exciting models of their own."

Small school district personnel recognize that there are unique problems resulting from being small. They see these as challenges rather than problems, however. Working with Bill Miles, Professor of Education at WWU, a group of 50 parents, teachers, school board members and administrators worked at identifying problems common to small districts.

1. Developing an awareness of giftedness among the entire school community. ("In our community every cook or bus driver is a key figure in the success or failure of a program.")

2. Resisting the stigma of elitism ("I hate the thought of another program that accentuates the differences between children.")

3. Preventing discouragement among those students who aren't selected into the magic circle of 3%. (Picking a few: it's like making the football team, or not being good enough. How much will others suffer emotionally?")

4. Finding a sustained source of funds. ("There's nothing worse in a small community than getting people behind a program and then taking it away from them because the money has dried up.")

5. Keeping the gifted student motivated when he is one of a kind. ("Could our consortium serve the function of bringing children from neighboring districts together for common experiences? Like a local Centrum?")

6. Getting a bigger share of state funds. ("I feel that any state funds for gifted children should be available as an allocation to each district instead of, if you're a good boy you get it and if you're a bad boy you don't.")

7. Finding appropriate resource persons, curriculum materials and organizational models for small districts. ("We need a clearinghouse of resources for small districts.")

8. Articulating the needs and strengths of small districts. ("We need someone to speak up for small districts to the SPI and the legislature on gifted education et al.")

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V. WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF GIFTED EDUCATION IN SMALL DISTRICTS?

Small districts are reaching a high awareness level of the special needs of gifted students. Although only 7 small school diistricts are named in the directory of state gifted programs a survey conducted by the Northwest Gifted Child Association indicates that most if not all are embarked upon some form of enrichment or differentiated programming.

Some are developing gifted programs with local funds, volunteers, donations and ingenuity.

Some are joined with other districts in consortiums, usually under the auspices of an educational service district.

Some have applied for and received federal planning grants for program development. (13 districts and one consortium of 12 small districts were successfull applicants for $28,000 made available to the state.)

Some are willing to release gifted children to the nearest district maintaining a state approved gifted program.

Some continue to rely upon the capabilities of the classroom teacher to provide appropriate education for gifted children.

In the coming biennium small districts look toward increased funding for gifted education and a more equitable distribution of that funding under a process similar to that devised for remediation funding.

All inequities in funding become grossly inequitable when applied to small districts and a process to weed out bureaucratic practices which result in inequities should be built into all mandated programs.

If gifted students are really entitled to an appropriate education they should not be denied one because of the size of the district in which they reside or the inexpertise of some grantwriter or an artificial limitation upon the numbers of gifted children who can be served in a district.

The case of Kirsten vs. LaConner raises one of many questions about the future legal implications of gifted education in Washington State. The existing laws, regulations and their applications are creating substantial disparities which need close attention as new laws and regulations go on the books.

Small school districts express an urgent need for validated field research leading toward improved program models, more uniform identification procedures, validated curriculum materials, staff development and recognition of the potentially gifted and talented among minorities. Small districts have turned to Title IV-C for R & D funds for the gifted. Some gifted child monies should be allocated specifically for research and development programs and their dessemination to other districts.

If funding continues to be allocated as it was in the last biennium small districts would like to see 20-25% of district funding reserved for districts under 2000 students with small district applications judged by persons selected for their interest in and knowledge of small districts.

Under the leadership of Superintendent Brouillet, the State School Board and the legislature a statewide plan for gifted education is emerging which can be a trail-

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